

# Michel Legrand, Pianist and Film Composer, Dies at 86

Mr. Legrand at the Birdland Jazz Club in New York in 2009. He continued to perform into his ninth decade, with gigs in London and Tokyo last year and a further tour scheduled for 2019. Joe Kohen for The New York Times

By John Anderson

Jan. 26, 2019



Michel Legrand, the invariably romantic pianist, arranger and composer of hundreds of film scores and songs that have become pop hits and love anthems, died on Saturday. He was 86.

His death was confirmed on the artist's official Facebook page by his management team.

Over a career of more than 60 years, Mr. Legrand collaborated onstage, onscreen and in the studio with dozens of celebrated musicians of his era, from Miles Davis to Perry Como, Stéphane Grappelli to Liza Minnelli.

A three-time Academy Award winner and five-time Grammy winner — he was nominated for a total of 13 Oscars and 17 Grammys — Mr. Legrand made the love song his métier. Among his better-known compositions are [“The Windmills of Your Mind”](#) from “The Thomas Crown Affair” (1968), which won the Oscar for best song; [“The Summer Knows,”](#) the theme from “Summer of ’42” (1971) (Mr. Legrand won an Oscar for the movie's score); and the Oscar-nominated [“What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?”](#) from the film “The Happy Ending” (1969). All three were written with the lyricists Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

His recording of “Brian's Song,” his theme from the TV movie of the same name, made the Billboard pop chart in 1972, peaking at No. 56.

A three-time Academy Award winner and five-time Grammy winner — he was nominated for a total of 13 Oscars and 17 Grammys — Mr. Legrand made the love song his métier.  
Keystone/Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

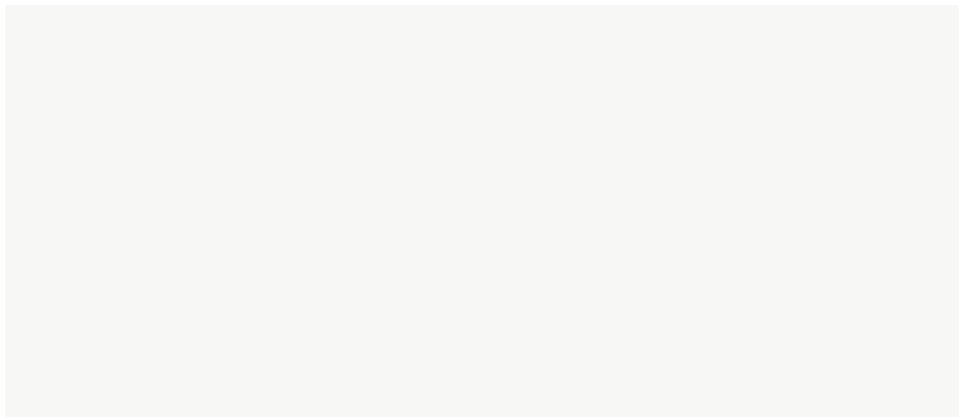
Other standards of the Legrand canon include [“I Will Wait for You”](#) and [“Watch What Happens,”](#) both from “The Umbrellas of Cherbourg” (1964), the writer-director Jacques Demy's musical tale of star-crossed love. (Norman Gimbel wrote the English lyrics.) A pop opera whose entire story was sung, “Umbrellas” first brought Mr. Legrand's talents to the attention of American moviegoers and earned him a devoted following in the United States. He also scored Mr. Demy's follow-up, “The Young Girls of Rochefort,” which included spoken dialogue as well as songs and which, like “Umbrellas,” starred the up-and-coming Catherine

Deneuve.

On the occasion of the 2009 British rerelease of “Rochefort,” Mr. Legrand told Time Out London of meeting Mr. Demy.

“I just finished scoring a François Reichenbach movie called ‘America as Seen by a Frenchman,’” he recalled. “Demy loved the score, so we met and he wanted me to score his first movie, which was called ‘Lola.’ So then I scored ‘Lola’ and we became friends and we came to know, appreciate and love each other, and we stayed friends until the very last.”

Mr. Demy, who died in 1990, was married to the filmmaker Agnès Varda, with whom Mr. Legrand also worked extensively. He even appeared onscreen, as a pianist, in her 1962 film, “Cleo From 5 to 7.”



Mr. Legrand, center, at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1993 with, from left, the French singer Rejane Perry, the American composer Quincy Jones, the American singer Barbara Hendricks, and the Canadian singer Robert Charlebois.

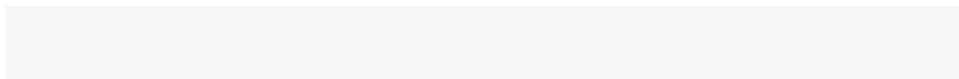
Anne-Christine Poujoulat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

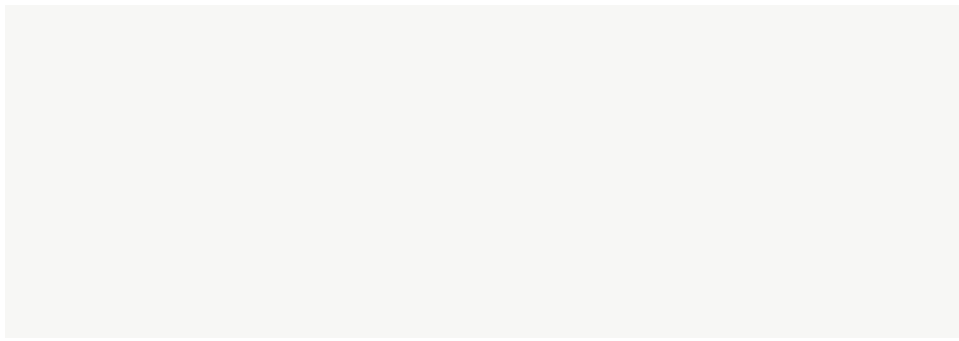
Among Mr. Legrand’s other notable compositions was [“Papa, Can You Hear Me?”](#) from the Barbra Streisand film “Yentl” (1983), also written with the Bergmans. He received three Oscar nominations for his work on that film, and won for its score.

In 2018, he composed music for [“The Other Side of the Wind,”](#) a lost film by Orson Welles, whose “F for Fake” he had scored in 1973.

Although Mr. Legrand composed far less for the theater than he did for film and television, he was nominated for Tony and Drama Desk awards for the show [“Amour,”](#) although it ran for only 17 performances on Broadway in 2002. He also wrote the music for “Marguerite,” a musical that had a brief run in London in 2008 whose creative team also included the writers and lyricists of “Les Misérables” and “Miss Saigon.”

Mr. Legrand recorded more than 100 albums, with such disparate stars as Maurice Chevalier (for whom he worked as an accompanist early in his career), Kiri Te Kanawa, Sarah Vaughan, Lena Horne and Barbra Streisand. Others who recorded his music ranged from Frank Sinatra to Sting.





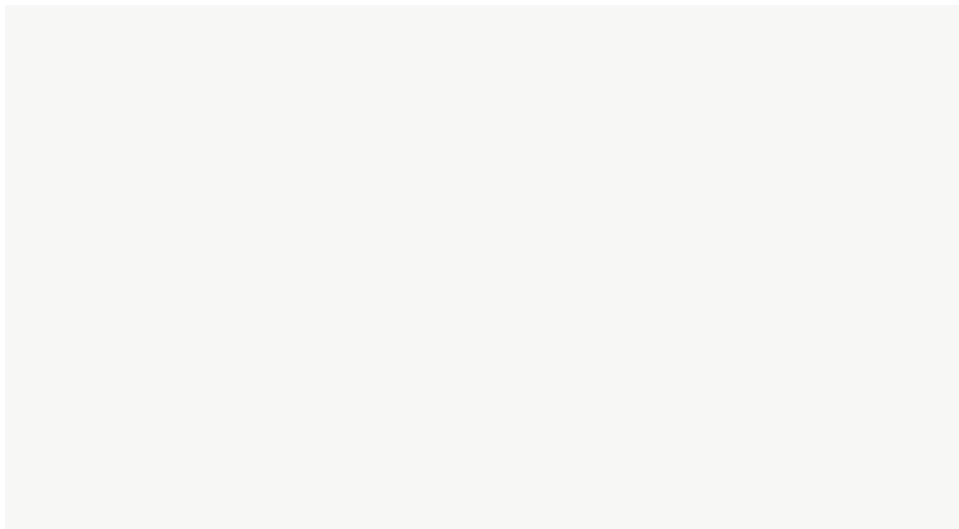
Mr. Legrand with his third wife, the French actress Macha Méril, in 2015.  
Anne-Christine Poujoulat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

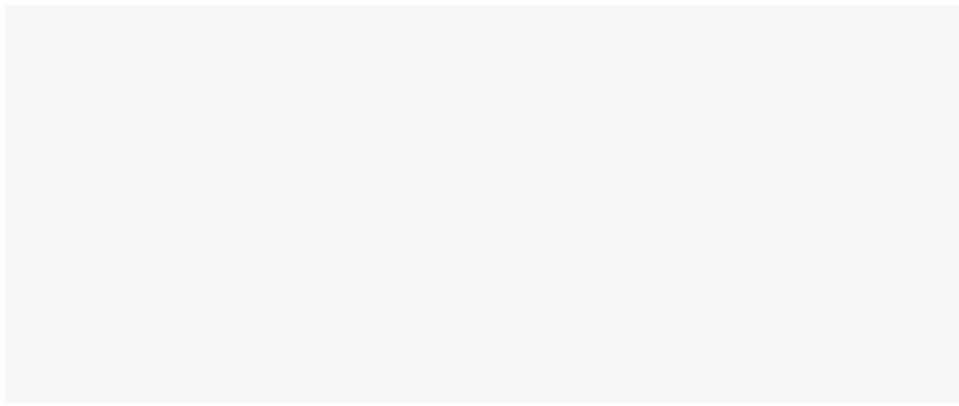
Mr. Legrand celebrated over 50 years in show business in 2010 with a concert at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas that featured Dionne Warwick, George Benson, Melissa Manchester, Patti Page and Jennifer O'Neill (the star of "Summer of '42"). He observed his 80th birthday in 2012 by beginning a world tour that included performances in France, Ireland, Japan, Argentina, Brazil, Russia, Denmark and the Netherlands. His schedule last year included performances in London, New York and Tokyo, and he was planning to tour again in 2019.

Michel Jean Legrand was born on Feb. 24, 1932, in Bécon-les-Bruyères, a suburb of Paris, to a French father, Raymond Legrand, a composer and actor, and an Armenian mother, the former Marcelle der Mikaelian. From 1942 to 1949, he studied at the Conservatoire de Paris, where his teachers included the celebrated pianist Nadia Boulanger, before becoming an in-demand arranger, working for French stars like Édith Piaf and Yves Montand.

In 1947, Mr. Legrand recalled in a 2011 interview, he became interested in jazz when he saw the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie in concert in Paris ("I was ecstatic"). He would eventually work with Mr. Gillespie and other jazz greats, on albums like "Dizzy Digs Paris" (1953) and, most notably, his own "Legrand Jazz" (1958), for which he arranged well-known jazz compositions for three different groups of established musicians, one of which included Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Bill Evans.

Mr. Legrand worked as an arranger with artists in various genres, including the opera singers Natalie Dessay and Anne Sofie von Otter.





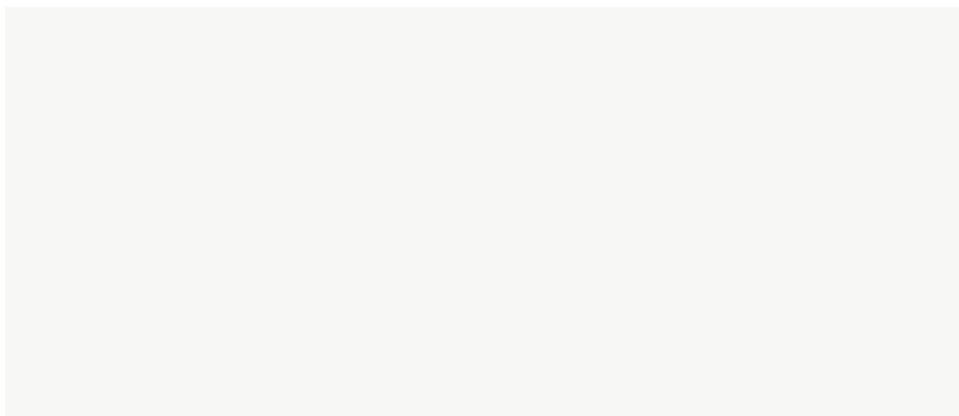
Mr. Legrand and the French director Agnès Varda after the screening of the film “Jacquot de Nantes” in homage to film director Jacques Demy, during the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. Anne-Christine Poujoulat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“While I was studying in Paris I decided that I wanted to touch on and exist within every possible musical discipline,” Mr. Legrand told Time Out London in 2009. “Concerts, records, radio, playing piano, conducting, singing, composing, classical, playing jazz. So when I started to work, it was really on that decision.”

Mr. Legrand became an international sensation in 1954 with “I Love Paris,” a collection of well-known French songs, followed by “Holiday in Rome” and “Michel Legrand Plays Cole Porter.” All were hits.

He was invited to the Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1958, and aboard the ship from Paris to Moscow he met his future wife, Christine Bouchard, an Yves Saint Laurent model. They had three children. He would eventually marry three times, most recently in 2014 to the actress Macha Méril.

Back in Paris, he began composing for film, working notably for New Wave directors like Jean-Luc Godard and later for Mr. Demy, whose “Umbrellas” earned Mr. Legrand his first three Oscar nominations. “The Young Girls of Rochefort” followed, and in 2009 Mr. Legrand was asked if that was a film of which he was particularly proud.



Mr. Legrand with Jerry Lewis at the 2013 of the Cannes Film Festival. Anne-Christine Poujoulat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“Yes,” he said, “but I must tell you, I’m not ashamed of anything I’ve done. All the films that I’ve done — and I’ve worked on about 250 — are like my children. So they are all special for different reasons.

“But I like everything that I’ve done, and why not? I always did it with pleasure, and I did it because I wanted to do it. There is always a reason, and that is important for me.”

In 1966 Mr. Legrand moved to Hollywood, where his friends and fellow composers Quincy Jones and Henry Mancini introduced him to the Bergmans. The first of his many collaborations with them was “The Thomas Crown Affair.”

On the occasion of a 2010 concert at Olympia Hall in Paris, Mr. Legrand was asked by French radio whether any of his dreams had gone unfulfilled.

“Off the top of my head,” he said, “I regret that I didn’t learn more languages, visit certain countries and listen to music that I don’t yet know about. In other words, there’s a whole cultural process that it’s been difficult for me to undertake because I’ve written a lot, worked, traveled, played around. So I haven’t had time to read some of the extraordinary books that I still think about.”

“And then,” he added, “I would have liked to work with Judy Garland, who I nurture a mad passion for. But I was born too late. So no regrets.”

Palko Karasz contributed reporting.

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